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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 001228

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SUBJECT: AIR POLICING DECISION CASTS LONG SHADOW IN
LITHUANIA

REF: VILNIUS 977

Classified By: Political/Economic Officer Alexander Titolo for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Extending NATO's interim Baltic air policing program or making it permanent is one of the GOL's highest security policy objectives. The GOL will look for continuation of 24/7 Baltic coverage as the optimal outcome of NATO's review of its air policing policy, and for NATO to defend this policy vigorously in discussions with Russia. The GOL fears a loss of confidence in NATO's security guarantees, and public demands that Lithuania provide for its own air defense will result if NATO ends 24/7 coverage. Such an outcome could jeopardize GOL's defense transformation plans and overseas operations. MOD and MFA officials express guarded optimism that proposals currently under discussion in NATO will maintain the interim mission. They voice significant concerns, however, regarding readiness standards and rules of engagement. End summary.

12. (C) The GOL has taken careful notice of the Russian Government's actions since the September 15 crash of a Russian Su-27 in Lithuania (reftel). After an initial period of bluster and blame-shifting, the last few weeks have witnessed Russian recognition of its responsibility for the accident. These include public reprimands of two senior Russian Air Force officials, swift payment of the agreed-upon damage claim, increased willingness to explore confidence building measures, and Russia's request to put "transparency and predictability in Baltic airspace management" on the November 23 agenda of the NATO-Russia Council. Lithuanian Minister of Defense Gediminas Kirkilas has publicly applauded these steps. At the same time, GOL officials privately tell us they still regard Russia as a threat that merits close attention.

13. (C) Darius Mereckis, the MFA's point man on air policing, underscored in discussions with us November 17 the GOL's insistence that all NATO allies have a minimum level of protection from air-based threats. Mereckis said the GOL will argue from this premise that the only way to achieve this goal is for NATO to station interceptors in the Baltics. Mereckis said that the NATO Air Defense Committee's October 14, 2005 note to the Secretary regarding NATO's air policing policy (NADC-D REV1) largely assuages GOL concerns about the future of the Baltic air policing mission. He interprets the draft policy paper as an indication that the final policy statement will keep planes in the Baltics on a permanent basis.

14. (C) Mereckis detailed the GOL's hope that the NATO Military Committee will incorporate lessons learned from the Su-27 crash in formulating readiness standards and command procedures for future Baltic air policing operations. Mereckis identified problems with communication procedures between the Regional Air Surveillance Coordination Center (RASCC) in Lithuania and the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Germany as one reason for the delay in scrambling Lithuania-based NATO interceptors in response to the SU-27 incursion. He acknowledged that Lithuania and the other Baltic nations must improve surveillance coverage of their airspace to help ameliorate this problem. To that end, the MOD has requested USD 6.2 million above its initial budget request to parliament for radar equipment upgrades.

15. (C) Mereckis opined that NATO needed to change the protocol that requires the interceptors to scramble only after a plane violates Baltic airspace. He argued that the NATO planes should respond when unidentified aircraft or those of a non-NATO country approach or appear to approach NATO airspace. Mereckis cited as model procedure for NATO's air policing planes the actions of Finnish and Danish national forces, which scrambled September 15 to monitor a squad of Russian planes flying near Finnish and Danish airspace. (The squad included the Su-27 that later broke formation and crashed in Lithuania.) Mereckis said the current requirement that the planes scramble within 15 minutes of receiving an order is acceptable.

16. (C) Putting security concerns in a political context, Marius Puodziunas, of the MOD's Defense Commitments Section, claimed to us that the Su-27 crash diminished public support

for NATO. Puodziunas also noted heightened public suspicions that good relations with Russia are a higher priority for the Alliance than the security of Lithuania. He pointed to polling after the Su-27 crash that indicated that 74% of Lithuanians want NATO to take a harder line in addressing Russia's actions. The GOL, Puodziunas said, is keen to prevent calls for Lithuania to develop a domestic air defense capability in the face of public perception that NATO does not adequately defend the Baltics. The MFA's Mereckis also drew attention to polling data showing that 40% of Lithuanians had lost confidence in the Lithuanian Armed Forces. Mereckis said the GOL wants to restore the public's confidence in the Armed Forces and NATO.

17. (C) Comment: We think that the GOL is overstating concern about public confidence in NATO, reflecting the security establishment's intense desire to make the NATO air policing mission in the Baltics permanent. Lithuanians understand that they have no other security alternatives besides NATO, and that they are simply too poor to field their own fighter aircraft capability, even in the unlikely event that the other two Baltic republics pitch in. At the same time, it remains politically important for the GOL to show Lithuanians that NATO air police will be on the neighborhood beat for the foreseeable future and that NATO understands that Russia's behavior towards the Baltics is not always friendly.

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